

# Saramaccan language

**Saramaccan** (autonym: *Saamáka*) is a creole language spoken by about 58,000 ethnic African people near the Saramacca and upper Suriname River, as well as in the capital Paramaribo, in Suriname (formerly also known as Dutch Guiana), 25,000 in French Guiana, and 8,000 in the Netherlands.<sup>[1]</sup> It has three main dialects. The speakers are mostly descendants of fugitive slaves who were native to West and Central Africa; they form a group called Saamacca, also spelled Saramaka.

Linguists consider Saramaccan notable because its vocabulary is based on two European source languages, English (30%) and Portuguese (20%), and various West and Central African languages (50%), but it diverges considerably from all of them. The African component accounts for about 50% once ritual use is taken into account, the highest percentage in the Americas, and is derived from Niger–Congo languages of West Africa, especially Fon and other Gbe languages, Akan and Central African languages such as Kikongo.<sup>[3]</sup>

Saramaccan	
Saamáka	
Native to	Suriname, French Guiana
Ethnicity	Saramaka
Native speakers	90,000 (2013) <sup>[1]</sup>
Language family	English–Portuguese Creole <div>▪<span> </span><b>Saramaccan</b></div>
Dialects	Matawai (Matawari)
Language codes	
ISO 639-3	srm
Glottolog	sara1340 ( <span>http://glottolog.org/resource/languoid/id/sara1340</span> ) <sup>[2]</sup>
Linguasphere	52-ABB-ax

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## Origins

The language is derived from Plantation Creole which is nowadays known as Sranan Tongo, however the branch diverted around 1690, and evolved separately.<sup>[4]</sup> The Saramaccan lexicon is largely drawn from English, Portuguese, and, to a lesser extent, Dutch, among European languages, and Niger-Congo languages

of West Africa, especially Fon and other Gbe languages, Akan, and Central African languages, such as KiKongo. The African component accounts for about 50% of the total.<sup>[5]</sup>

Saramaccan phonology has traits similar to languages of West Africa. It has developed the use of tones, which are common in Africa, rather than stress, which is typical of European languages.

Over a fourth of words are from English. It is generally agreed that the Portuguese influence originated from enslaved peoples who lived on plantations with Portuguese masters and possibly with other slaves who spoke a Portuguese creole. The masters might have brought the latter in migrating to Suriname from Brazil.<sup>[6]</sup> Saramaccan originators began with an early form of Sranan Tongo, an English-based creole, and transformed it into a new creole via the Portuguese influx, combined with influence from the grammars of Fongbe and other Gbe languages.<sup>[7]</sup>

## Dialects

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Saramaccan is divided into two main dialects. The Upper Suriname River dialect and the Lower Suriname River dialect are both spoken by members of the Saramaccan tribe.<sup>[8]</sup>

## Matawai

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The Matawai tribe has its own language which is related to the Saramaka language.<sup>[9]</sup> The language is derived from Plantation Creole which is nowadays known as Sranan Tongo, however the branch diverted around 1700, and evolved separately.<sup>[4]</sup> Matawai is spoken in the villages in Kwakoeegron and Boven Saramacca, however code switching with Sranan Tongo, other Maroon languages, and Dutch is common. The language is considered endangered.<sup>[10]</sup>

## Phonology

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### Vowels

	<u>Front</u>	<u>Back</u>
<u>Close</u>	i	u
<u>Close-mid</u>	e	o
<u>Open-mid</u>	ɛ	ɔ
<u>Open</u>	a	

Each oral vowel also has a corresponding nasal vowel. There are also three vowel lengths: /bɛ/ "red", /bɛ́ɛ/ "belly," /bɛ́ɛ́ɛ/ "bread."<sup>[11]</sup>

### Consonants

		<u>Labial</u>		<u>Dental/ Alveolar</u>		<u>Palatal</u>		<u>Velar</u>			
								<u>plain</u>		<u>Labial</u>	
<u>Nasal</u>		m		n		ɲ					
<u>Plosive</u>	<u>plain</u>	p	b	t	d	c	ɟ	k	g	kp	gb
	<u>prenasalized</u>		mb		nd		ɲɟ		ŋg		
<u>Implosive</u>			ɓ		ɗ						
<u>Fricative</u>		f	v	s	z	ç					
<u>Approximant</u>				l		j				w	

/c ɟ ɲ ɲɟ/ are more specifically dorso-postalveolar, but the palatal fricative /ç/ is dorso-palatal.<sup>[11]</sup>

## Tone

The language has two surface tones: high and low. Stress in European words is replaced by high tone in Saramaccan.<sup>[11]</sup>

## Lexicon

Saramaccan's vocabulary is 30% derived from English, 20% from Portuguese. It is one of the few known creoles to derive a large percentage of its lexicon from more than one source (most creoles have one main lexifier language). Also, it is said to be both an English-based creole and a Portuguese-based creole.<sup>[12]</sup>

About 50% of the vocabulary of Saramaccan is of African origin,<sup>[13]</sup> the largest percentage of any creole in the Americas. Source languages for these words include Kikongo, Gbe languages, and Twi.<sup>[12]</sup>

## Examples

To English-speakers not familiar with it, the English basis of this language is almost unrecognizable. Here are some examples of Saramaccan sentences, taken from the SIL dictionary:

*De waka te de aan sinkii möön.*

"They walked until they were worn out."

*U ta mindi kanda fu dee soni dee ta pasa ku u.*

"We make up songs about things that happen to us."

*A suku di soni te wojo fëën ko bëë.*

"He searched for it in vain."

*Mi puu tu dusu kölu bai ën.*

"I paid two thousand guilders to buy it."

Examples of words originally from Portuguese or a Portuguese creole are *mujee* (*mulher*) "woman", *womi* (*o homem*) "man", *da* (*dar*) "to give", *bunu* (*bom*) "good", *kaba* (*acabar*) "to end", *ku* (*com*) "with", *kuma* (*como*, cf. vernacular Brazilian *cuma?* for *como é?*, "come again?") "as, like", *faka* (*faca*) "knife", *aki* (*aqui*) "here", *ma* (*mas*) "but", *kendi* (*quente*) "hot", *liba* (*riba*) "above", and *lio* (*rio*) "river".

# Literature

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Saramaccan has a rich history of published works, including the following dictionaries: Christian Schumann's 1778, *Saramaccanisch Deutsches Wörter-Buch*,<sup>[14]</sup> Johannes Riemer's 1779 *Wörterbuch zur Erlernung der Saramakka-Neger-Sprache*, a copied and edited version of Schumann,<sup>[15]</sup> Jan Voorhoeve and Antoon Donicie's 1963 wordlist, *De Saramakaanse Woordenschat*,<sup>[16]</sup> Antoon de Groot's, *Woordregister Nederlands- Saramakaans met context en idioom* (1977)<sup>[17]</sup> and his *Woordregister Saramakaans-Nederlands* (1981),<sup>[18]</sup> and Glock (ed) *Holansi-Saamaka wöutubuku* (Nederlands-Saramaccaans woordenboek)<sup>[19]</sup>

The *Instituut voor Taalwetenschap* has published tens of literacy books written by Saramaccans and a complete translation of the New Testament.<sup>[20]</sup> Two books written by Richard Price have now been published in Saamaka:<sup>[21]</sup> *Fesiten* and *Boo go a Kontukonde*.<sup>[22]</sup> There is no official orthography of the Saramaccan language at the moment.

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## External links

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- [Saramaccan Vocabulary List \(https://wold.clld.org/vocabulary/36\)](https://wold.clld.org/vocabulary/36) (from the World Loanword Database)
- [Survey article \(https://apics-online.info/surveys/3\)](https://apics-online.info/surveys/3) (from the *Atlas of Pidgin and Creole Language Structures*)
- [SIL Saramaccan-English dictionary \(http://www.suriname-languages.sil.org/Saramaccan/English/SaramEngDictIndex.html\)](http://www.suriname-languages.sil.org/Saramaccan/English/SaramEngDictIndex.html)
- [Collected Saramaccan texts \(http://www.sil.org/contributor/glock-naomi\)](http://www.sil.org/contributor/glock-naomi)
- [Loan words in Saramaccan \(http://www.acsu.buffalo.edu/~jcgood/jcgood-LoanwordsInSaramaccan.pdf\)](http://www.acsu.buffalo.edu/~jcgood/jcgood-LoanwordsInSaramaccan.pdf)
- [Variety of published resources in and about Saramaccan language and culture \(http://www.language-archives.org/language/srm\)](http://www.language-archives.org/language/srm)

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